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ABSTRACT

A study examined the developmental epistemologies of first-year university students at a comprehensive university, based on the idea that students often come to the university in intellectual transition which may affect their epistemological stances toward writing. The students' comments as reported from a survey fall into seven categories: topic, topic choice, content, and meaningfulness; opinion, personal experience, sources, interpretation, and plagiarism; grades; form, grammar, style, length, and thesis statement; assignments, assignment specifications, due dates, and classroom quirks; creative expression; and distrust, power issues, effort, and cheating. Findings suggest: students prefer choice both in topics and in response; students arrive with histories which often include writing experiences that were not always conducive to good writing; teachers must be aware that style may be explained as opinion, convention, suggestion, or choice; and teachers need to refigure, re-theorize, or reconceptualize opinion/argument papers, perhaps choosing the business report/ recommendation format instead. Contains 46 references. An appendix contains the survey instrument. (EF)

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Development Revisited: Writing and Knowing in Transition

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National Council of Teachers of English

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Development Revisited: Writing and Knowing in Transition

Introduction:

The relationship among epistemology, ontology, and language remains as difficult to explore as any writing phenomena. Through the emergence of social-constructionism, scholars (notably Berlin, and Fulkerson) use these categories to critique writing theories by arguing that "others frame the debate at the ontological level, but I frame it at the epistemological level." In a less contentious approach, other scholars (cf. Caufield, 1995) argue that as reality is framed by language (knowledge as epistemic), ontology is subsumed by epistemology; thus, "rhetoric is epistemic."

Because of this Dowst (1980) suggests that language users create their worlds. His analysis further uses the communication triangle to note that the differing theories emphasize aspects to show the relationship of language to reality. Formalists focus on language; referentialists focus on language and reality; expressivists focus on language and the writer; rhetoricians focus on language and the reader/writer relationship; epistemicists focus on language, writer, and reader. Since then, theories have been grouped by their emphasis on one aspect of the communication act: speaker/writer; listener/reader; speech act/text; context (see Warnock, 1989, for an excellent analysis using this method; see also Fulkerson, 1979, 1990). These theories, likewise, seek to address some more fundamental questions, even toward the nature of the person (Young, Becker, & Pike, 1970): Are writers "born" or "made"? Are language and/or writing a series of isolated skills or integrated skills (see Rose, 1985, on whether skill is an appropriate description or not); or is writing a process, method or skill, product, or

knowledge application (as educational researchers Davis, Scriven, Thomas, 1987, ask in regard to emerging writers)?

Considering the complexity describing the process of thinking, several points are worth noting. First, as Vygotsky (1978) notes language development takes place at early ages and precedes development in writing. Second, the relationship between writing and language is that the study of language shows the re-emergence of the importance of context, especially on some of the models of the 1970s and 1980s that had emphasized the individual (cf. Flower, 1989). Finally, language use reflects the interplay between writer/speaker, reader/listener, text, and context. Thus the relationships among epistemology, ontology, and language remain complex throughout the individual's development.

Here a brief discussion of epistemology is in order. Epistemology studies how a knower knows, what a knower knows, what is known, and how certain a knower might be. Epistemologies (and corresponding ontologies) often are framed in terms of binaries (Absolutism vs. Relativism or Universals vs. Particulars--for example, Hillocks, 1999, uses objectivist and constructivist in his analysis). Rationalism and Empiricism are methods for obtaining knowledge, and each self-evidently also places truth-value on the knowledge which is obtained. Where absolutism would indicate that Truth is possible, relativism suggests only possible truths; as such, the relationship of language to truth is open for epistemological difference. Thus, some scholars have noted that epistemology can affect the writing classroom. For example, Hillocks (1999) describes how objectivist and constructivist epistemologies affect the way teachers and students interact. However they are defined, relativism and absolutism remain two worldviews that affect how students negotiate their knowledge. Thus, by describing the philosophical and developmental epistemologies, then, certain implications for the writing classroom emerge.

Let me briefly speak to the first, and then I'll go into greater detail on the second. Although research has looked at attitudes toward writing and its instruction (Daly & Miller, 1975; Daly & Wilson, 1983), no instrument is available for uncovering theories about writing and the teaching of writing. The closest attempt was Charney, Newman, & Palmquist (1995) who looked at attitudes toward writing and beliefs about knowledge. From the perspective of philosophy, how we come to know is often intertwined with what we know.

The what of epistemology is broken down into statements which reflect one of three epistemologies through questions which reflect this ask how people obtain knowledge. The first is internalism (rationalism and romanticism). Subjects who lean toward this orientation would be more inclined to believe people think through things in their minds, use intuitions, or relate words and definitions to other words. The second is externalism (empiricism and pragmatism). Subjects who lean toward this orientation would be more inclined to believe people use senses and observations, use trail-and-error, or let facts speak for themselves. The third is relationalism (social-construction or socialized belief). Subjects who lean toward this orientation would be more inclined to believe that people listen to peers and relatives, respond to the media, agree with societal values, and accept what is taught in school.

Because scholars acknowledge writing as epistemic, they should likewise be aware that knowledge often develops along predictable patterns, of which researchers in developmental psychology are beginning to move from static categories toward better understanding the process of making knowledge through transition

History.

As the previous section discussed the "what" of epistemology, the next section moves from development of thinking to demonstration of this development (the "how" of

epistemology). Although there exist alternate explanations of how epistemology affects the writing class, developmental psychology seems the most useful. Van der Pligt & Eisner (1984) describe the move from understanding attitudes and beliefs in general but note that there remains difficulty in determining why any particular individual would value any particular beliefs. Thus, personality theory (including the work of Jung and followers) has some potential for understanding ideology in the classroom (cf. Jensen & DiTiberio, 1989, for composition; also M. Harris, 1993). The work in multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) may also be useful. These theories may do a better job of ascertaining the why of epistemology at the expense of essentializing, yet the work in developmental psychology provides background information about theories of learning, thinking, and decision-making at the expense of creating deficit models. This latter then allows scholars to see not only the "what" of epistemology, but also the "how."

Work in developmental psychology began with Piaget, but the work of William Perry investigated the reasoning of college students. Perry's (1970) scheme traces the transition of epistemology and values from absolutism, to relativism, to contextual, to committed. His nine stages include several transition stages, but students move along these lines until they are able to initially take an informed and committed position in one area or topic from a period of relativism. Because of Perry's limited selection, other scholars have tried to expand on these categories. Gilligan (1982) notes that the move from absolutes is evident in both males and females, but that the absolutes themselves are different. As women move toward commitment, it remains within a context of relationship. Basseches (1984) places universalism and relativism as two modes of thinking which are tempered by dialectical thinking--that is the "process of finding and creating order" (p. 11). He uses Perry's model to extend Piaget's formal operations as

parallel developments in dialectical thinking (pp. 235ff). Belenky *et al* (1986) agree that Perry's scheme describes both women and men, but see that there is more beyond his categories. Their categories (received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, constructed knowing) often overlap with Perry's, but often the focus remains different (for example, received knowing is dualistic, but differs in locus--outside experts rather than individualistic experts). Baxter-Magolda (1992) synthesizes these in her study, noting that patterns are socially constructed and fluid and that the categories of gender are not absolute (pp. 21-22). Her research shows students move through categories of knowing (absolute, transitional, independent, and contextual) as they move through college until they are experts within their own perspective, or what Gilligan (1982) describes as "the epistemological discovery of contextual relativism" (p. 155)..

Many of these theories have been applied to the writing classroom (Cooper & Holzman, "Women's Ways of Writing,"1987; Hays, 1995, see also Anson, 1989; Burnham, 1986; Bizzell, 1984, provides a critique), but not specifically to ascertaining theories of language and writing (again, Charney, Newman, & Palmquist, 1995, come closest). What many of these applications lack, though, is a greater emphasis on the transitions between ways of knowing and writing. As writers move from seeing the teacher as authority to seeing themselves as meaning-makers in context, they often show uncertainty in writing and thinking. As teachers we need to acknowledge these transitional incongruities rather than attempt to assign categories. Thus, my project focuses on socio-cognitive development which notes changes in reasoning patterns (Kitchner, 1982). The classroom remains a site of teaching and learning, yet students often come to the university in intellectual transition that may affect their epistemological stances toward writing.

In following the epistemological development models that have been created by scholars, [1] I will focus primarily on the differences between absolutism and relativism (cf. Charney, Newman, Palmquist, 1995) as well as establishing that many students remain in transition. Thus, while development seldom proceeds "naturally," our making the transitions explicit foregrounds the process and allows students to understand and apply these insights through writing. As such, subjects who have an orientation toward absolutism would agree with statements suggesting that experts know the right answer or when two experts disagree one is wrong, and would disagree with statements suggesting there is no right answer or everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. Likewise, relativists would hold opposite views. As the developmental model allows for transitions, it is difficult to place subjects who take less extreme positions.

The Study

This paper reports on smaller portion of a larger study. The large study surveyed first-year students at three institutions, a research university, a comprehensive university, and a liberal arts university. Additionally, teachers of first-year writing were surveyed. See the handout for a copy of the survey. This paper focuses on the second page of the survey and uses the results from one institution--the comprehensive university. Here 29 out of 46 classes were surveyed.

Where the numbers have not all been tallied, some patterns are noted: 1) A large majority of students marked 4 on question 3, 2) Out of the 29 classes, approximately 20 total students were classified as strongly relativistic or absolute (defined as 1 on Question 1 and 4 on question 10 or visa versa); likewise few students answered strongly on question 4.

Before describing these, I must note that we only have the student comments. Occasionally, student answers might incriminate teachers and the teaching practices of high school teachers is not my focus nor to I want to take "pot shots" at teachers; suffice it to say that

we must deal with residual student disaffection with the writing pedagogies they have expeirenced. The answers on the open-ended question were varied. I have grouped them into 7 categories. This excludes two which, while apparently self-explanatory, need a brief comment--no answer and not applicable. The first indicated no response and the second was usually a "no" or "I don't remember or recall." The later also included the response of "none." Data from interviews suggest that many of these responses might indicate some absolutist thinking as they and the teacher should agree, or if there was a disagreement, then the student was wrong. For example:

> *I never have disagreements. If they say it is wrong I feel that they are the teacher, and they know their things more than I do.*
>
> *Never had a real conflict about my writing that I took to heart. If the teacher found some things in my writing they didn't like, I'd change it.*
>
> *I always just agree with what the teacher says.*

Category 1 includes comments regarding topic, topic choice, content, and meaningfulness. Although category 1 responses do not show a relativism/absolutism spin, they show confusion when freedom is curtailed. Generally, students prefer topic choice and control over content. They comment:

> *I had a professor who refused to accept my paper because it was not within the bounds of his conceptualization of the topic.*
>
> *In the tenth grade my teacher didn't care for the particular subject of my paper. He docked me major points because he didn't find this paper humorous as it was intended to be. I took it to the school board. The school board sided w/ my teacher. Now I stray away from writing controversial papers about subjects that are highly debatable.*

One note is that many college teachers are likewise limiting freedom by making "taboo topics" lists.

> *One of my teachers once counted off of one of my papers for using a celebrity as an example. He later then counted off on my next paper for not using a celebrity as an example in my paper.*

Another comment segues into the next category. The student writes:

> *Forced content and the presentation of the class colored to an extreme degree have been my only problems. Sometimes the specifics of an assignment are heavily regimented and the creation process can be impeded. In addition, if the instructor has specific views that he/she feels are very important, it can influence the outcome of grading.*

Category 2 includes comments regarding opinion, personal experience, sources, interpretation, and perhaps even plagiarism. While I will address this a bit more later, students wonder how teachers can question personal experience, dislike opinions, and pretend to value individual interpretation while valuing only one. This latter is true mostly of poetry where students are told to interpret only find that teachers believe there is only correct interpretation (see Hull and Rose's "This Wooden Shack Place"). As noted student are broadly relativistic in thinking that "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion." Here are some comments:

> *Sometimes I find that teachers, when correcting papers, do not look at writing objectively. I think sometimes my papers get graded on what I believe or think rather [than] on actual content. I've had many arguments/disagreements with teachers concerning this matter.*

> *In my high school college prep class we were asked to write an opinion paper. After handing in the paper and receiving my grade, my teacher told me my facts were wrong. I argued w/ her on how an opinion paper could have wrong facts. She said that she was right and I was wrong, so I should live w/ it.*

> *He didn't understand my point of view, and wasn't willing to help me understand his. He was constantly arguing with me about stupid things.*

> *Teacher not agreeing w/ my opinion on an opinion paper.*

> Or to put in more concretely:

> *I'm a Christian and a lot of them take off points because they don't agree with my beliefs.*

What I think we have here is a failure to communicate. Teachers have many ways to tell the students "I don't disagree but you could use more detail or better evidence," or we indicate "your ideas are good but your usage needs improvement" but what students hear is "you don't like my opinions, beliefs, or ideas, therefore the you are grading me lower."

Category 3 includes comments over grade (and grade alone). Many times students merge the grade issue with other issues, and they also speculate how things like opinions and personal experience can be graded. Additionally, students comment that they have received grade changes when discussing the matter with the teacher. I did not pull out any examples from this group, but they exist.

Category 4 includes comments concerning form, grammar (mechanics and punctuation), style, length, and thesis statements. Occasionally, a comment about handwriting or writing like speaking comes here. Two points, first, again poetry is questioned as students find teachers expecting other things, and second, length is a strong issue, or bone of contention. In the broader sense of style, students acknowledge that they and their teachers have various kinds of style and that they question the teachers' holding that against them.

> *I was writing a research paper, and my teacher did not like my theses. I went to the writing lab for help, and they thought it looked great. I went back to the teacher to ask what they wanted, and the teacher said, if I didn't already know, I never would.*
>
> *We both had different ideas of what was "good writing" and she didn't think mine was. Conflict of interests.*
>
> *I've been told that I write like I talk* [student answered 1 to A10]

Relativism and issues of style seem to be connected. In interviews, student would indicate that there are different styles of writing and neither style is better than another is. This seems to mark a transition--they know of difference but are not ready to incorporate the difference, or make it work rhetorically. Here a student writes of the differences:

Differences of opinions, in culture, in upbringing, in sense of humor, in educational level.

Category 5 includes comments concerning assignments, assignment specifications, due dates, and classroom quirks such as lost papers or note passing. These comments are generally not useful, but occasionally provide some insight into practices.

> *When I was in junior high, I had to write a story, which included a rough and final draft. The day after I handed them in, the teacher told me I had writing problems because I changed some of my ideas and phrases between the two drafts.*

While I have noticed that students understand revision and did not seem to believe papers were one draft only, the one draft only seems like a "holy grail" for student writers.

Category 6 includes comments concerning expression, especially creative, including word choice and detail. Here many students try to either use different approaches, or use various vocabularies and the teachers somehow attempt to stifle them. Students are comfortable writing as they speak, in the language they converse in and are always pushed to more formal ways by the teachers. As a side note, what I have discovered during interviews is that many students enjoy creative writing, but dislike reports and research papers.

Category 7 includes comments concerning ownership. Here they describe distrust, issues of power, accusations regarding lack of effort, and even suspicions of cheating. Students want to retain ownership and the way in which many teachers respond to papers takes that away. The issue of ownership is important to students, and here they break away from absolutist thinking the most strongly. They write:

> *This summer I had a [] class. I had to write a paper and when I got it back my teacher had crossed sentences and phrases out and some of the suggestions seemed like they were not necessary. I didn't respond to my teacher about my concerns but it made me kind of mad.*

> *My teacher and I had a disagreement when she practically wanted to rewrite my entire paper.*

In high school my teacher and I disagreed about writing. I felt that in order for her to accept it, it had to be written as if she *had written it. Even when changes were made to her expectations and standards, she would continue to change it. I feel writing is personal and individualized. I don't agree with writing sentences or paragraphs that someone else wrote (teacher).*

My senior year of high school my advanced comp teacher tried to totally restructure my writing process . . . . I think teachers should quit trying to change a person's writing process.

I wrote what I thought to be a good paper, but my teacher would read it and say go back and change this. She proceeded to do this numerous times, finally I just handed it in and left the classroom in anger. She didn't explain what she was looking for, but it was very disturbing to me.

Last year my Advanced Composition teacher would always change everything in my papers. He would change them so it wouldn't even say or mean anything like I wanted it to.

After taking American Literature in High School, I lost all confidence in my writing. Especially after I'd get back paper after paper back completely violated w/ red marking. I tried to fix things but she always seemed to find more things wrong. It was like telling me you can't write give up.

[*An eighth-grade student received 3 weeks detention for not doing note cards.*]

I always have conflict or difficulty with English teachers because I'm told "You're not a good writer."

I can't think of one specific instance, but I will explain the problems I have with classes that involve writing. My biggest problem is that a good writer can write a paper in half an hour and will get a better grade than I for a paper I spent 3 hours on. Some people are just better writers and that's the way it is.

One teacher thought I wasn't writing to my full potential but I was and that caused a conflict.

As you might expect the categories overlap, especially in terms of ownership. Here are some additional responses that summarize the problems well:

I've had difficulty writing my opinion on a response paper to an essay I have no interest in. We have requirements on the length of the response when I don't even have anything to say.

I had to write a paper and the teacher checked the draft, and I made changes but I kept getting a bad grade, even though I used her ideas to change my paper.

My teacher told me to write about I wanted and then she tried to change my whole paper. My teacher told me that there was no wrong way to write a paper and then when it wasn't her way I got a bad grade.

I did write how the teacher wanted me to. When I continued to write the way I wanted my grade started to suffer.

Even a student who might sound like an absolutist has at least acknowledged a darker side:

I have never had any real disagreements with teachers. I write what they tell me to write whether I like it or not. Challenging them would be a waste of time because I would still have a bad grade on the paper and *I would be on poor terms with the teacher.*

Implications

Here a student relates relativism and ownership, while also describing the final product:

Generally I hold the belief that pretty much everything is subject to individual interpretation. In other words I may be assigned a project/paper/writing and then I interpret as my own. This makes it mine and my creative process can then begin. This has been a source of puzzlement for some professors, however my final product has generally pleased them and received an excellent grade.

From these comments and others, I have drawn some tentative conclusions:

1) Students prefer choice both in topics and in response. They may even understand that although the teacher is trying to help, they would rather retain ownership, even when the writing may not correspond to the teacher's ideal
2) This project reminds us that, regardless of development, our students do not arrive without histories and often that history includes writing experiences that were not always condusive to good writing. Where absolutism might explain students who just want to give teachers what they want, experience has also taught students this lesson.
3) In terms of style (or even usage), are these things opinions, conventions, suggestions, choices. If we explain them as choices, are we still traditional in requiring students to make

the right choices? Here we often conflict with absolutists by pointing out that language is not set in stone, but relativists then go further and test the boundaries.

4) Most importantly, I believe teachers need to refigure, re-theorize, or re-conceptualize opinion and/or argument. Students are in transition in what to do about opinion, and I suppose they can articulate the difference between fact and opinion, but where does argument lie? More practically, I think teachers need to re-evaluate how they assess these kinds of papers. In the politically aware classroom, teacher need greater sensitivity toward student opinion as differences of opinions might influence grading, or at the least student perceptions of the fairness of assessment. For teachers looking to replace argument, opinion, or persuasive papers, I might suggest papers modeled after business report/recommendations.

Notes

[1] Such as Bloom et al. (1956), Perry (1970), Kitchner & King (1981), Gilligan (1982), Basseches (1984), Belenky et al. (1986), Newman (1993; cf. Charney, Newman, & Palmquist, 1995) (see Chickering, 1981, for a comparison of other developmental theories).

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Student Survey

The purpose of this survey is to approximate what you think writing is and what you think are strategies for obtaining and verifying knowledge as well as any possible relationship between the two. As research suggests that students sometimes have difficulty writing in school because of potential differences, you are asked to describe some instance(s) you may have experienced or might imagine.

Please indicate how strongly these statements describe your beliefs by circling the number that corresponds to these descriptions:
4=Completely Agree 3=Generally Agree 2=Generally Disagree 1=Completely Disagree

Part A: What is Writing?

1) Writing is presenting ideas	4	3	2	1
2) Writing is expressing feelings	4	3	2	1
3) Writing is describing facts and events	4	3	2	1
4) Writing is following rules and conventions	4	3	2	1
5) Writing is creating new meaning	4	3	2	1
6) Writing is organizing pre-existing knowledge	4	3	2	1
7) Writing is stating beliefs and opinions	4	3	2	1
8) Writing is telling stories	4	3	2	1
9) Writing is putting words on paper	4	3	2	1
10) Writing and speaking are the same process	4	3	2	1

Part B: How do people obtain knowledge?

1) They think through things in their minds	4	3	2	1
2) They use intuitions and feelings	4	3	2	1
3) They rely on their senses and observation	4	3	2	1
4) They use trial-and-error	4	3	2	1
5) They relate words and definitions to other words	4	3	2	1
6) They listen to what peers and relatives tell them	4	3	2	1
7) They seek information from the media	4	3	2	1
8) They value what society considers important	4	3	2	1
9) They accept what they learned in school	4	3	2	1
10) They let facts speak for themselves	4	3	2	1

4=Completely Agree 3=Generally Agree 2=Generally Disagree 1=Completely Disagree

Part C: How do people know something to be true or accurate?

1) Experts know the right answer	4	3	2	1
2) When two experts disagree, one is wrong	4	3	2	1
3) Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion	4	3	2	1
4) When people disagree, any position is equal	4	3	2	1
5) What is right depends on context	4	3	2	1
6) Multiple sources will lead to the right answer	4	3	2	1
7) Logic and evidence will lead to the right answer	4	3	2	1
8) Statistics will lead to the right answer	4	3	2	1
9) Each society will have its right answer	4	3	2	1
10) There is no right answer	4	3	2	1

Part D: Dissonance
For this question, you do not have to write an essay; feel free to make a list or write a couple of sentences.

Describe some instances where you and a teacher had a disagreement, conflict, or difficulty concerning your writing, a particular assignment, or a piece of writing.